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ABSTRACT

Noting that the emphasis in writing instruction over the past 40 years has shifted from product to process, this digest focuses on the experience of individual teachers as they searched for ways to put the principles of process writing into practice in the classroom. The first section discusses writer's workshops, noting that teachers have found them effective in helping students (from as early as first grade) master the principles of process writing, and that they also improve students' feelings and attitudes about writing. The second section deals with questions about writer's workshops and potential problems that need to be considered. Journal writing is discussed in the third section. The digest's final section examines writing instruction in the upper grades, finding a predominantly "modernist" writing curriculum that fails to encourage proficient writers because it does not allow students the chance to experiment with various approaches beyond the five-paragraph essay structure. (SR)

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by Carl B. Smith

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Writing Instruction: Current Practices in the Classroom

by Dr. Carl B. Smith

Over the past forty years, the emphasis in writing instruction has shifted from product to process. A companion ERIC Digest entitled *Writing Instruction: Changing Views over the Years* gives an overview of this development during the period from 1960 to 1999. The present digest focuses on the experiences of individual teachers as they searched for ways to put the principles of process writing into practice in the classroom.

Writer's Workshops

Teachers have found that writer's workshops are effective in helping students master the principles of process writing in particular. "The term 'writer's workshop' refers to an environment conceived to encourage written expression." Because writing is difficult and risky, "children need to know that their environment is a predictable, safe place for them to take risks" (Bunce-Crim, 1991; cited in Bayer, 1999, p. 8).

Even first-graders can benefit from writer's workshops. Fisher (1995) says that "writing workshop is an essential part of the curriculum in my first grade classroom, and almost every morning the children are involved in self-selected writing endeavors." This lets students know that writing is important and that they can count on "daily opportunities to pursue their own topics, work by themselves or with friends, and begin a new piece every day or work on a story or book over time" (p. 1).

With young children, a systematic organization of materials is essential. Furthermore, a predictable routine helps children get organized first thing in the morning. Fisher also reads aloud to the class during the day so that children can hear different models of written language. Also, frequent mini-lessons are used to focus on specific areas of writing such as procedures (using a folder), strategies (such as using books to inspire topics), qualities of good writing, and skills (p. 2).

Bayer (1999) evaluated a first-grade class to find out whether or not students actually became more confident, proficient writers after participating in a writer's workshop. Children actively participated in the workshop two or three times a week, and each session began with a mini-lesson that focused on a specific topic such as sentence structure, correct capitalization, punctuation, and grammar. After the mini-lesson the actual writing began, with the teacher modeling her own writing along with the children. The teacher worked with individuals as needed, helping each child focus on the appropriate step in the writing process.

Before beginning writer's workshop, students were asked how they felt when the teacher said it was "writing time," whether or not they liked to write, whether they preferred to pick their own topics, and how they described themselves as writers. The same questions were asked during the final weeks of the workshop. The results showed that to a great extent "writing workshops improve the feelings and attitudes that first graders have about writing, as well as how they feel about themselves" (Bayer, 1999, p. 6). For example, the percentage of children who looked forward to writing time almost doubled, and the number of those who said they liked to write jumped from 25 percent to 71 percent.

Questions about Writer's Workshops

Although the preceding comments suggest that children can benefit greatly from writer's workshops, there are questions and potential problems that need to be considered. Sudol and Sudol (1991) discuss some of the questions that arose during the adoption of the process approach and during a writer's workshop in a fifth-grade classroom taught by Peg Sudol.

In the first place, there is the question of time. Although some recommend as much as an hour of writing each day, it is difficult to devote this much time when other subjects must be taught as well. Also, curriculum requirements may make it difficult for students to choose their own topics because teachers are required to teach specific kinds of writing (Sudol & Sudol, 1991, p. 294).

Another problem relates to pacing and deadlines. It is true that all students should not be expected to work at the same pace, but a few students may have difficulty ever completing any project. In addition, students are often put off by workshops devoted to assigned writing types.

In general, the experience of Peg Sudol was positive in spite of the problems encountered early on. "In the main, her children enjoyed the writing. (Now they moaned and groaned whenever the workshop was canceled.) They wrote more than any of her previous students, and the quality of their writing was better" (1991, p. 299). Among the most productive parts of the writer's workshop were the mini-lessons, in which students could address problems such as run-on sentences within the context of their own writing, not in abstract textbook lessons.

Journal Writing

Routman (2000) points out that journal writing is a good way to begin implementing a writing workshop because journals can "promote fluency in reading and writing, encourage risk taking, provide opportunities for reflection, and promote the development of written language conventions" (p. 233). However, the advantages of journal writing can be lost if teachers fail to monitor students' work and to let them know what is expected.

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All too often, children's journals are flawed by sloppy, careless writing and frequent misspellings of easy words. Furthermore, they seldom show clear improvement over time because journal writing is too often used as a time filler, not as something the children feel is really worthwhile. In many cases, teachers do not provide any guidance for journal writing. They also tend to assign topics rather than letting students choose their own. Unfortunately, students come to accept sloppy writing and bad spelling as the norm for journals since they don't seem to matter. Finally, teachers too often assign journal writing as an activity separate from writing workshop, which makes it appear that journal writing is not as important as "real writing."

Routman suggests that journal writing can become more worthwhile if teachers encourage students to write for several days on a topic they care very much about and if they teach students how to write with detail and voice. Furthermore, students should realize that journal writing is only one type of writing they are expected to do, and they should maintain high standards for legibility and neatness (adapted from Routman, 2000, p. 235).

Writing Instruction in the Upper Grades

Wartchow and Gustavson (1999) analyzed writing instruction in the upper grades by interviewing some high-school students from a large urban school and others from a private suburban school. They were immediately "struck by the modernist picture that the students painted of their schools" (p. 3). The modernist view is based on the belief that "there is a 'natural order' or 'best way' on which all methodology is based. Once discovered, this best way should be, indeed must be, followed" (Doll, 1993, p. 45; cited in Wartchow & Gustavson, 1999, p. 3).

In both schools, analytical writing was stressed above all else, with emphasis on the customary pattern: introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and conclusion. "Once the students write their five paragraph essays, often choosing theses created by the teacher, the teacher can easily grade them because there is an identifiable structure" (Wartchow & Gustavson, 1999, p. 5). This forces students to accept the format and procedure prescribed by the teacher. Furthermore, students come to rely on the teacher for topics and motivation; they are not shown how to develop and explore ideas on their own. They are also put off by the "simplicity and pettiness of their writing assignments" and the knowledge that teachers "only expect a sentence or two" when students respond to various readings (p. 7).

As for personal or creative writing, many students question its worth because it is given no value in school. They also believe that creative writing must necessarily lack coherence because it does not follow the five-paragraph pattern. Finally, some students realize that teachers view creative writing as chaotic and therefore worthless because it does not fit into a "required body of quantifiable, systematically constructed knowledge" (Wartchow & Gustavson, 1999, p. 11). When asked what kinds of creative assignments they would prefer, students provided some valuable insights. One told of rewriting the end of a Shakespeare play and then performing it for the class. Another was challenged by exploring what might happen if *Wuthering Heights* were set in the present day. Students also suggested that assigned topics could be turned into thesis statements, encouraging students to argue their points and take a more active approach to writing.

Students also find it difficult to reconcile the conflict between what they are required to write in school and what they want to write for themselves. Time constraints often cause students to "go through the motions" to complete a school project according to a prescribed procedure. Also, students realize that they can be intellectually lazy as they churn out school writing according to the required format; on their own, their writing leads them to probe below the surface and try to think things through.

As a result of the findings summarized above, the authors have been led "to argue for an aesthetic, post-modern orientation in the teaching of writing. Within the students' frustrations and desires lies the question: Why do many English teachers not engage their students in a discourse on the aesthetics of writing?" (p. 20). A modernist writing curriculum fails to encourage proficient writers because it does not allow students the chance to experiment with various approaches beyond the five-sentence paragraph structure. In addition to advocating a clearer connection between the process and the product, the authors "also strongly believe that the power for understanding writing lies in the actual *doing* of the art, not in the exclusive observation of it" (Wartchow & Gustavson, 1999, p. 20).

"Too often in English classrooms, teachers expect students to critique the writing they read with little or no understanding of the craft, the historical context, or the personal nature of that writing. Essentially, students must write about an art of which they have no experience" (p. 20). By encouraging students to move beyond convenient structures and to enter into the intricate process of creating what goes into those structures, teachers can help them discover that what they have to say is important and that there are many ways to organize their thoughts to form convincing, coherent arguments.

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